

The origins of CAP date to 1936, when Gill Robb Wilson, World War I aviator and New Jersey director of aeronautics, returned from Germany convinced of impending war. Wilson envisioned mobilizing America's civilian aviators for national defense, an idea shared by others. In Ohio, Milton Knight, a pilot and businessman, organized and incorporated the Civilian Air Reserve (CAR) in 1938. Other military-styled civilian aviation units emerged nationwide, training for homeland defense.

In 1941, Wilson launched his perfected program: the Civil Air Defense Services (CADS). That summer, tasked by Fiorello H. LaGuardia (director of the federal Office of Civilian Defense and also a World War I aviator), Wilson, publisher Thomas H. Beck, and newspaperman Guy P. Gannett proposed Wilson's CADS program as a model for organizing the nation's civilian aviation resources. Their proposal for a Civil Air Patrol was approved by the Commerce, Navy, and War departments in November, and the CAP national headquarters opened its doors on Dec. 1, under the direction of national commander Maj. Gen. John F. Curry. Existing CADS, CAR, and other flying units soon merged under the CAP banner. Public announcement of CAP and national recruiting commenced on Dec. 8.



In January 1942, German submarines began attacking merchant vessels along the East Coast. With the military unable to respond in force, CAP established coastal patrol flights to deter, report and prevent enemy operations. From March 1942 through August 1943, armed CAP aircraft at 21 coastal patrol bases extending from Maine to the Mexican border patrolled the waters off the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Their success in thwarting submarine attacks and safeguarding shipping lanes led President Franklin D. Roosevelt to issue Executive Order 9339 on April 29, 1943, transferring CAP from the Office of Civilian Defense to the Department of War.

At its establishment, CAP made no provision for the participation of youths. On Oct. 1, 1942, CAP leaders issued a memorandum creating the CAP Cadet Program for boys and girls ages 15-18. The cadet program proved to be a powerful force for imparting practical skills and preparing teenagers for the military and other wartime service agencies.

Origins 1936–1941

World War II and postwar 1942–1949



target and tracking operations, forest patrols, and many others. CAP's wartime record ensured its postwar future. On July 1, 1946, President Harry S. Truman signed Public Law 79-476, incorporating the organization. Following the creation of the U.S. Air Force (USAF) as a separate branch of the armed services, Truman signed Public Law 80-557, establishing CAP as the USAF's civilian auxiliary on May 26, 1948.

Post-World War II, the CAP focused its efforts on the cadet program, emergency services, and aerospace education. In 1948, CAP began participating in the International Air Cadet Exchange, and in 1949, introduced its first aerospace education literature for use by CAP units or school teachers. When the first cadets entered the U.S. Air Force Academy in 1955, 10 percent were former CAP members.

Cold War 1950–1975

As the Cold War grew in the 1950s, CAP closely aligned with the Air Force and civil defense organizations. CAP search and rescue (SAR) missions became routine, and civil defense officials used CAP radio networks to coordinate relief efforts during natural disasters. CAP assisted in training the Air Force's Ground Observer Corps, conducted aerial radiological monitoring of nuclear fallout, and helped train personnel in Operation MOONWATCH to optically track artificial satellites. The 1974 law making emergency locator transmitters mandatory in aircraft vastly improved CAP's SAR capabilities. In 1975, for the first time, a civilian volunteer became CAP's national commander, signaling a shift in the CAP-USAF relationship.

The latter half of the Cold War witnessed the further expansion of CAP roles and capabilities. In 1979, CAP began flying military training route surveys for Strategic Air Command and Tactical Air Command. A 1985 agreement with the U.S. Customs Service saw CAP conducting counterdrug reconnaissance missions for law enforcement. CAP once again began delivering parts for the USAF and flew human tissue and organ transplant missions with the American Red Cross.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Federal Emergency Management Agency worked with CAP responding to a slew of disasters, among them the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, Hurricanes Hugo, Andrew, and Floyd, and the Oklahoma City bombing. Modernized equipment, including global positioning system (GPS) navigation, Internet-based communications, and handheld two-way radios,

CAP's male and female volunteers engaged in an array of wartime missions. These included aircraft warning, southern liaison patrol duty along the Mexican border, courier service, missing aircraft searches, disaster relief, tow

improved CAP SAR performance and coordination with federal authorities. The final decades of the 20th century brought key changes to CAP, including the transition to an entirely corporate-owned fleet of aircraft and vehicles.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 ushered CAP into a new era of homeland defense. The following day, a CAP Cessna 172, was the only non-military aircraft aloft, ordered to provide emergency management officials with the first high-resolution images of the World Trade Center site. Nationwide, CAP volunteers transported blood and medical supplies, provided communication and transportation support, and assisted state and federal officials.

New Millennium 2001–now



Through increased federal funding and the creation of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, CAP received new technologies, including hyperspectral imaging, improved airborne communication, forward-looking

infrared systems, GPS-equipped glass cockpit avionics, and geospatial information interoperability. Today, CAP aircrews train alongside government officials and military personnel in air defense intercept missions, communication exercises, cybersecurity, and even simulate unmanned aircraft to provide training support for deploying forces.



Through the development of National Cell Phone Forensics and Radar Analysis Teams, CAP is using digital resources to save lives and local missing aircraft with expedient precision. Together with small, unmanned aircraft systems (sUAS) and increased sensor technologies, CAP's emergency services are more capable than ever before.

On Aug. 28, 2015, Gen. Mark A. Welsh III, Air Force chief of staff, announced the CAP officially a member of the USAF's Total Force, joining the regular, guard, and reserve forces as American Airmen. CAP's work in response to Hurricanes Katrina and Maria, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and in the COVID-19 response continue to demonstrate the cost-effective contributions of dedicated volunteers who embody the CAP motto:

Semper Vigilans . . . Always Vigilant!



“The **Civil Air Patrol** grew out of the urgency of the situation. The CAP was set up and went into operation almost overnight. It patrolled our shores and performed its antisubmarine work at a time of almost desperate national crisis. If it had done nothing beyond that, the Civil Air Patrol would have earned an honorable place in the history of American air power.”

General Henry H. “Hap” Arnold,
Commanding General of the
U.S. Army Air Forces, Dec. 15, 1944



On May 30, 2014, President Barack H. Obama signed legislation into law awarding the Congressional Gold Medal to the

Congressional Gold Medal

Dec. 10, 2014

approximately 200,000 World War II members of CAP. The medal is the country’s highest expression of appreciation for distinguished achievements and contributions. On

Dec. 10, 2014, Speaker of the House John Boehner presented the medal to CAP National Commander Maj. Gen. Joseph R. Vazquez and former U.S. Rep. Lester L. Wolff, himself a wartime member of the New York Wing.

This medal commemorates the organization’s unusual contributions in World War II. On the obverse, Stinson Voyager 10A aircraft armed with demolition bombs escort an oil tanker. The aircraft in the foreground has the coastal patrol roundel and the number “65” representing the CAP members killed during the war. To the left, two civilian volunteers, a male coastal patrol observer and a female pilot, both vigilantly scan the sky.



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U.S. Air Force Auxiliary

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Learn more at gocivilairpatrol.com

Learn more about CAP’s history
at history.cap.gov

